

December 21, 2000

Heath Meriwether, Editor
Detroit Free Press
321 W. Lafayette Blvd.
Detroit, MI 48231

To the Editor:

Please consider this letter for an Opinion Editorial on Jack Kresnak's Arianna Swinson series.

Jack Kresnak's series on Arianna Swinson's tragic death raised public awareness of child abuse and neglect and the system intended to address it. The system includes FIA, courts, prosecutors, law enforcement, schools, medical providers, neighborhoods, extended family, community support groups, private sector professionals, and concerned citizens.

There have been several major themes in the letters, e-mails and phone calls I have received in the last two weeks, in response to the series of articles. I would like to share the themes and my reaction to them.

"Parents who abuse children should never get them back." Under Michigan's child protection laws, a parent who slaps a child and causes a minor but intentional injury (a bruise, or a cut resulting from a fall) may be guilty of child abuse even if it was a first or isolated incident. This first or isolated incident typically, and many would say appropriately, does not result in termination of parental rights. Severe abuse or continued high risk of severe abuse should result in termination of parental rights.

"FIA places family reunification above a child's safety at all costs." While Arianna's case may fuel that perception, this is a false conclusion. The safety of children is the paramount principle that guides children's protective services policies and procedures. Approximately 19,000 children are under the supervision of the FIA and over 8,000 children were placed in foster care in 1999 due to abuse or neglect. In the 12 months ending June 1999, FIA and court actions resulted in the termination of the parental rights for 3,538 children.

"FIA shouldn't keep secret files." "Secret" is a misleading word. By Michigan law, case files are confidential. Both state and federal laws require that children's protective services files may not be shared except for a limited number of reasons, such as law enforcement or treatment purposes. The laws help protect the rights of those falsely accused and the identities of other parties such as siblings. The laws ensure the anonymity of the person reporting the abuse, which



can be critical to getting a reporting source to come forward. FIA workers or other individuals who release this confidential information are breaking the law.

“FIA is not doing its job.” These statements are unfair to the hard working and dedicated FIA staff who provide children’s protective services 24 hours a day, seven days a week doing a difficult, sometimes dangerous and disheartening job. The reality is that government, particularly any one part of government, cannot do this alone. It must be a community issue. As I previously mentioned, FIA is but one part of the system.

“The system is broken.” The system did not save Arianna and the significance of a lost life cannot be understated, but it is also an exception to the system when a child is lost. During fiscal year 2000, the FIA children’s protective services received approximately 120,000 complaints of abuse or neglect and confirmed more than 15,000 cases affecting nearly 27,000 children. More than 6,000 of those children had physical injuries. One tragic case should not lead to the conclusion that the entire system is broken. Nevertheless, our system can be improved and I am dedicated to doing that. But again, the FIA is not the entire system. We all have to work together. Every member of the public should sound the bell immediately and repeatedly if they are aware that a child is at risk, or if it appears that FIA or the courts or any other entity is overlooking facts or responsibilities in a child protective services case, before a tragedy occurs.

“FIA children’s services staff have a hard job and it’s too bad their efforts are not always acknowledged by the public.” To those of you who acknowledged this, I thank you on behalf of the staff that are truly dedicated to the children of Michigan.

“Why isn’t FIA outraged.” We are, I am, along with lots of other emotions. No one should view Arianna’s death as acceptable.

Here are some of the things we have done in the last few years to improve FIA’s part of the system:

- Through planning and shifting of resources, we have decreased the statewide average foster care caseload per worker from 31:1 in fiscal year 1999 to 27:1 in fiscal year 2000, and are decreasing it to 23:1 by the end of this fiscal year. Foster care staff monitor children out of the home.
- We have increased child protective services staffing by 182, or 33.6% over the last 5 years.
- We have implemented numerous changes to provide additional protections for children such as: safety and risk assessment tools; extensive training in child forensic interviewing skills; Child Welfare Institute training (8 weeks) for children’s services workers; increased child contacts to assure safety; 170 policy changes to meet children’s need; twice weekly home visits to check on child well being in the urban counties; and 22 contracts with prosecuting attorneys to protect children. We have also established child death review teams in 78 counties.



Here are some of the things I commit our agency to do:

- Direct additional resources to demands in foster care and child protective services.
- Work with prosecuting attorneys and court officials on the issue of legal representation in all counties. Prosecutors and judges are your local elected officials. You can help by reinforcing with them your expectations concerning child protection.
- Reassess our internal supervisory practices so we better support the decisions of our field workers while increasing safeguards for children and the accountability of FIA's part of the system.
- Work with our private sector partners who provide more than 60 percent of our foster care services to ensure they have appropriate safeguards in place.
- Work harder to share information about thousands of dedicated, committed FIA staff persons and the good work they do. They care, they rejoice, and they grieve just like everyone else. However, unlike everyone else, they are judged by a standard most of us cannot conceive of, regardless of their involvement or their performance. The stakes in their jobs are human lives. They can have hundreds or thousands of successes, but when a child death occurs, no matter where or how, the integrity of staff statewide can be called into question. However, when was the last time you recall seeing a story in this newspaper praising an FIA worker for a success working with a family? That's a side of our business most readers never or rarely see. This, too, is because of confidentiality for the families we serve.

If I could turn back the hands of time to change things, I would. Since none of us can do that, we must work to improve the system. I hope and believe that we can strengthen the child protection system in Michigan, but FIA can't do it alone. Together, I believe we can eliminate gaps to prevent as many injuries to children as possible.

Sincerely,

Douglas E. Howard.

